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SUBJECT: POLICE TEAR GAS ISLAMIC GROUP IN BAMAKO

REF: BAMAKO 01336

1.(SBU) An estimated 40 individuals were slightly injured on November 13 in Bamako when Malian security forces used tear gas and batons to disrupt a protest meeting organized by Modibo Sangare, the president of the National Union for Rebirth (UNPR). The UNPR is a fringe political party dedicated to the preservation of Islamic values. Sangare and his supporters, including many women in full hijab, gathered to express opposition to proposed legislation that would abolish the death penalty and provide increased rights for women and children (reftel). The UNPR intended to hold a protest march but failed to receive the required permits from Bamako city officials. Sangare consequently converted the march into a "meeting" at UNPR headquarters.

2.(SBU) As an outspoken advocate of Sharia law, Sangare is at the extreme of Mali's Muslim society and has little if any support amongst the Malian public. The UNPR holds no elected offices. Sangare said lack of funds prohibited the UNPR from conducting a census of its members and was therefore unable to provide details on the number of UNPR members. Despite Sangare's obvious lack of support amongst the Malian public, his vocal opposition to the new legislation introduced by President Amadou Toumani Toure, and the city of Bamako's repeated refusals to give the UNPR permission to march, have translated into a significant amount of local press coverage.

A report of the November 13 meeting in the government newspaper "L'Essor" quoted Sangare as saying "the moment has come for Muslims to break with pacifism, which is starting to lead our country down the wrong path. It is time for this situation to change. We need to show our strength, because we are fighting on God's behalf. He who gives his life to God does not die in vain." Police then tear-gassed the meeting.

3.(SBU) Sangare ran for President of Mali in 2002, receiving less than 12,000 votes. In 2007 Sangare failed to qualify for the presidential ballot after the UNPR proved unable to pay the USD 20,000 registration fee. In a brief discussion with the Embassy, Sangare described himself as Mali's only "Muslim" presidential candidate - a pointed jab at the secular platforms of Mali's mainstream political leaders and parties. Despite his strident rhetoric, Sangare rejected the use of violence and said the UNPR would fight against any attempt to abolish the death penalty in Mali with acts of civil disobedience such as sit-ins, protest marches and calls for nation wide referendums.

4.(SBU) Sangare favors the strict application of Sharia law and said he supported public stoning and the amputations of hands in accordance with the Koran. He also advocated for separate public transport facilities for men and women, and separate health care systems for men and women patients and doctors. Sangare attributed what he regards as a decline in Malian morality to Mali's failure to implement the death penalty since the 1980s, the abolition of child labor and laws forbidding parents from beating their children. "We

were whipped as children," said Sangare of his generation of Malians, "and it didn't kill us."

5.(SBU) Despite his fundamentalist views and disagreement with certain aspects of U.S. foreign policy, Sangare said he looked up to the U.S. as an important defender of religious freedom. He noted that elected officials in the U.S. take oaths of office on a bible and that "In God We Trust" is written on U.S. currency. He also contrasted American acceptance of veiled Muslim women with laws in France banning Muslim girls from wearing head scarves to school.

6.(SBU) Comment: Sangare and the UNPR have little to no support in the arena of Malian public opinion, even though Sangare's outspoken opposition to legislation abolishing the death penalty resonated with many Malian Muslims. Ironically, Bamako city official's heavy-handed treatment of the UNPR's request for marching permits may have actually boosted the party's level of support and public profile, eliciting some sentiments of solidarity from more mainstream opposition parties, including the African Solidary for Democracy and Independence (SADI). SADI condemned the use of force against the UNPR on November 13 and described Malian authorities' actions as a violation of democratic liberties.
McCulley